

# DEMOCRACY AS A CONTESTED CONCEPT IN POST-WAR WESTERN EUROPE: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF POLITICAL DEBATES IN FRANCE, WEST GERMANY, AND ITALY\*

PEPIJN CORDUWENER

*Utrecht University*

**ABSTRACT.** *This article explores how political parties in France, West Germany, and Italy conceptualized democracy and challenged the conceptions of democracy of their political adversaries between the end of the 1940s and the early 1960s. It studies from a comparative perspective the different conceptions of democracy held by Christian democrat, Left-wing, and Gaullist political actors and shows how these diverged on key issues such as the economic system, foreign policy, the separation of powers, electoral systems, and the use of state institutions in the defence of democracy against anti-democratic forces. In this way, the article reveals how in the first fifteen years after the Second World War, government and opposition parties disputed each other's democratic credentials and political legitimacy, and it thereby reconsiders the claim that there existed a broad consensus on the meaning of democracy among political elites in post-war Western Europe. It is argued that these different conceptions of democracy only started to converge after they had clashed during political crises at the turn of the 1960s in all three states. This study thereby contributes to an enhanced understanding of the formation of the post-war democratic order in Western Europe.*

---

In comparison with their pre-war predecessors, the ‘transformed’ democracies of Western Europe in the immediate post-war era were highly successful.<sup>1</sup> A historiographical consensus has emerged which posits that the key to their success

*Department of History and Art History, Utrecht University, Drift 6, 3512 BS Utrecht, The Netherlands  
[p.corduwener@uu.nl](mailto:p.corduwener@uu.nl)*

\* This article is based upon a paper delivered at a colloquium of the Royal Netherlands Academy of Sciences in Amsterdam. I would like to thank Martin Conway for his valuable comments on the paper given there. Many thanks also to Ido de Haan for the stimulating discussions which contributed to the development of the argument, and to the anonymous reviewers for their insightful suggestions for improvement. Finally, I would like to thank the Royal Netherlands Institute in Rome for facilitating my research stay in Italy.

<sup>1</sup> For the coinage of the term ‘transformed’ democracy, see M. Mazower, *Dark continent: Europe's twentieth century* (London, 1998), pp. 287–91.

lay in three related spheres: post-war democracies were ‘militant’ democracies willing to use institutional means to protect democracy against alleged anti-democratic forces, they were grounded upon elite collaboration rather than polarization, most notably between the major political parties who limited popular influence on political decision-making, and, an aspect contingent upon the previous two, political elites broadly agreed on what was to be understood by ‘democracy’.<sup>2</sup>

By weaving together thematically three national political debates on the conceptions and practices of democracy in the period between the signing of post-war constitutions and the early 1960s, this article reconsiders the claim that there existed a broad consensus on the meaning of democracy. It argues instead that during the 1950s the question of how democracy should be conceptualized and practised was a matter of profoundly polarized debate between the major political actors in France, West Germany, and Italy, and unveils that these actors felt to live through an age of democratic crisis rather than consensus.<sup>3</sup>

## I

The polarized debate over the meaning of democracy in the face of the legacy of fascism and the tensions released by the Cold War was characterized by a paradox. In a way, ‘democracy’ was everywhere in this debate and virtually every political actor called itself a democrat after the Second World War.<sup>4</sup> The leader of the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD), Kurt Schumacher, observed that ‘today nobody dares to declare its political principles anti-democratic, totalitarian or dictatorial’.<sup>5</sup> The Italian Christian democrat and interior minister, Mario Scelba, observed that ‘what is currently missing is a precise connotation of democracy, caused by the fact that everyone calls themselves democrats’.<sup>6</sup> This illustrates that the universal championing of

<sup>2</sup> See most notably J. W. Müller, *Contesting democracy: political ideas in the twentieth century* (New Haven, CT, 2011), pp. 128–45; M. Conway, ‘The rise and fall of Europe’s democratic age, 1945–1973’, *Contemporary European History*, 13 (2004), pp. 67–88; M. Conway, ‘Democracy in postwar Europe: the triumph of a political model’, *European History Quarterly*, 32 (2002), pp. 59–84; C. S. Maier, ‘Democracy after the French Revolution’, in J. Dunn, ed., *Democracy: the unfinished journey, 508 BC–1993 AD* (Oxford, 1993), pp. 125–52; R. Vinen, *History in fragments: Europe’s twentieth century* (London, 2000), pp. 358–403.

<sup>3</sup> See for instance P. Mendès France, ‘La crise de la démocratie’ (1954), in P. Mendès France, *Ceuvres complètes: pour une république moderne, 1955–1962* (Paris, 1987), pp. 81–102; P. Nenni, *Dialogo con la sinistra cattolica* (Milan, 1954); L. Erhard, ‘Massenmensch aus eigener Schuld’ (1952), in L. Erhard, *Gedanken aus fünf Jahrzehnten* (Düsseldorf, 1988), pp. 343–5.

<sup>4</sup> J. Dunn, *Setting the people free: the story of democracy* (London, 2005), p. 14; Maier, ‘Democracy after the French Revolution’, p. 138.

<sup>5</sup> K. Schumacher, ‘Sozialismus als integrierende Kraft der europäischen Demokratie’ (1948), in K. Schumacher, *Turmwächter der Demokratie: ein Lebensbild von Kurt Schumacher. II. Reden und Schriften* (Berlin, 1953), pp. 139–65, at p. 139.

<sup>6</sup> M. Scelba, *Solidarietà nazionale e coscienza democratica* (Rome, 1950), p. 12.

democracy ensured that competing conceptions of this concept co-existed and strove for supremacy. Another Italian Christian democrat, Aldo Moro, therefore wrote that the overwhelming post-war enthusiasm for ‘democracy’ showed that democracy was a contested concept and that its meaning consequently needed ‘to be conquered’.<sup>7</sup>

This article studies these efforts to ‘conquer’ the meaning of democracy in the 1950s. It does not pretend to give a complete overview of its various usages, but explores from a comparative perspective how the major political parties conceptualized democracy and challenged the conceptions of their adversaries.<sup>8</sup> Democracy is studied here as a contested concept which was used in widely diverging ways, thanks to the fact that it had become an ‘empty formula’ and the ‘appraisive political concept *par excellence*’ after the Second World War.<sup>9</sup> The focus of this contribution lies with the public political debate. The article is consequently grounded upon a wide range of sources ranging from speeches, articles, and party programmes, but excludes internal party publications, since these do not enlighten how political forces discredited each other’s conceptions of democracy publicly.

For obvious reasons, West Germany, France, and Italy are the key examples of ‘transformed’ democracies in Western Europe. Germany and Italy were both democratic ‘late-comers’, adopting this form of government after the Great War, with the Weimar constitution and the installation of universal male suffrage and the system of proportional representation in Italy in 1919.<sup>10</sup> Both experiments with mass democracy had failed, resulting in the fascist and Nazi dictatorships and ultimately in new post-war constitutions after the Second World War. France had already a long, but troubled relationship with democratic government, with the Third Republic almost collapsing under domestic pressures before the Nazi occupation and the Vichy dictatorship.<sup>11</sup> Also, France wrote a new constitution after the war, expressing the aspiration to mark a new democratic beginning – even if the text ultimately resembled the

<sup>7</sup> A. Moro, ‘Una falsa democrazia’ (1945), in A. Moro, *Scritti e discorsi, 1940–1947* (Rome, 1982), p. 245.

<sup>8</sup> In this studying of ‘conquering’, it is indebted to the methodological work of Michael Freeden, who is particularly susceptible to the way in which political actors claim to ‘decontest’ the meaning of political concepts. See M. Freeden, *Ideologies and political theory: a conceptual approach* (Oxford, 1996). See also B. Strath, ‘Ideology and history’, *Journal of Political Ideologies*, 13 (2006), pp. 23–42.

<sup>9</sup> W. Conze, H. Maier, C. Meier, and H. L. Reimann, ‘Demokratie’, in O. Brunner, W. Conze, and R. Koselleck, eds., *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe* (7 vols., Stuttgart, 1972–92), I, pp. 821–99, at p. 898; W. B. Gallie, ‘Essentially contested concepts’, *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 56 (1955–6), pp. 167–98, at p. 184.

<sup>10</sup> See for instance R. Vivarelli, *Storia delle origini del fascismo: l’Italia dalla grande guerra alla marcia su Roma* (3 vols., Bologna, 1991), II, p. 26; H. Mommsen, *Aufstieg und Untergang der Republik von Weimar* (Berlin, 1998).

<sup>11</sup> See for instance Z. Sternhell, ‘Emmanuel Mounier et la contestation de la démocratie libérale dans la France des années trente’, *Revue française de science politique*, 34 (1984), pp. 1141–80.

constitution of the Third Republic.<sup>12</sup> Additionally, West Germany, France, and Italy were the three states in Western Europe most deeply affected by the Cold War: Italy and France because of their large communist parties, and West Germany because of the division of the country.<sup>13</sup>

Looking at the national debates from a comparative perspective, the article demonstrates that there existed similar patterns in the mutual contestation of conceptions of democracy across national borders, stimulated by the fact that no significant power alternations between government and opposition occurred until the end of the 1950s. The outline of this article consequently follows this distinction between government and opposition. The following section discusses the way in which Christian democratic governments in West Germany and Italy and the successive centrist coalitions of France's Fourth Republic conceptualized democracy, and studies how and why they questioned the democratic credentials of the main opposition parties. The third section analyses how these in turn contested the principles with which government parties claimed to defend the democratic order and studies how Left-wing opposition parties and the French Gaullists conceptualized democracy. The fourth section investigates how this polarized debate ultimately contributed to a process in which different conceptions of democracy commenced to converge at the turn of the 1960s, while the final section makes some historiographical remarks about the relevance of this article's conclusions for our understanding of post-war Western European democracy.

## II

The composition of post-war Western European governments remained fairly unchanged over the course of the 1950s. In France after May 1947, the successive governments were supported mainly by a fragile coalition of Christian democrats, socialists, and radicals. In West Germany and Italy, Christian democrats constituted the major forces in centrist government coalitions throughout the 1950s. In the immediate post-war era, when anti-fascism was still the dominant political perspective,<sup>14</sup> Christian democrats emphasized their progressive character, claiming that large-scale social reforms were needed to eradicate the roots of fascism. They were critical of the 'bourgeois' democracies that had characterized pre-war Europe, which were allegedly too elitist and did not

<sup>12</sup> P. Facon, *La IVe République* (Paris, 1997), p. 83.

<sup>13</sup> This ensured an American influence on the post-war intellectual and political debate in Germany and Italy in particular. See for instance M. del Pero, 'The United States and "psychological warfare" in Italy, 1948–1955', *Journal of American History*, 87 (2001), pp. 1304–34; S. Former, 'Das Sprachrohr keener Besatzungsmacht oder Partei: Deutsche Publizisten, die Vereinigten Staaten und die demokratische Erneuerung in Westdeutschland, 1945–1949', in A. Bauerkämper, K. H. Jarausch, and M. M. Payk, eds., *Demokratiewunder: Transatlantische Mittler und die kulturelle Öffnung Westdeutschlands, 1945–1970* (Göttingen, 2005), pp. 159–89.

<sup>14</sup> On this moment of anti-fascist unity, see for instance G. Eley, *Forging democracy: a history of the Left in Europe, 1850–2000* (Oxford, 2002), pp. 283–98.

offer substantial levels of social security to provide hard-needed political stability.<sup>15</sup>

However, while Christian democrats continued to emphasize their position as centrist forces with an interclass character, their conception of democracy became more conservative with the onset of the Cold War, which not only required a fierce rejection of fascism, but also demanded a reaction to Marxism at home and abroad. Despite the obvious differences between a socialist and communist opposition in Italy and the anti-communist SPD in West Germany, the political discourse of the Christian democrats in both countries reveals that they conceptualized democracy in similar terms. Both Christian Democratic Union (CDU) leader Konrad Adenauer and Christian Democracy (DC) leader Alcide De Gasperi endorsed a conception of militant democracy in which the Left was portrayed as a menace to the state institutions which Christian democrats claimed to defend.<sup>16</sup>

In Italy, the rift between the Left and Christian democrats was rooted in their collaboration in the anti-fascist resistance during the war and culminated in the epic election of 1948.<sup>17</sup> It ensured that ‘anti-fascism in these years lost its political immediacy, references to the Resistance were virtually abandoned by the government parties’.<sup>18</sup> International circumstances contributed significantly to the denial of the democratic legitimacy of the Italian communist party (PCI). The American interference in the 1948 election was immense, while the US endeavoured to prevent the DC from collaborating with the Marxist Left throughout the 1950s.<sup>19</sup> Thanks to the crucial role of the PCI in the Italian Resistance and its contribution to and identification with the Italian constitution, it proved to be difficult for the DC to delegitimize the democratic credentials of the communists completely.<sup>20</sup> Nonetheless, the DC increasingly

<sup>15</sup> W. Becker, ‘Der Einfluß der Unionsparteien auf der politische Ordnung der Bundesrepublik Deutschland’, in E. Lamberts, ed., *Christian Democracy in the European Union, 1945–1995* (Leuven, 1997), pp. 224–41; C. Campanini, ‘I programmi del partito democratico cristiano’, in F. Malgeri, ed., *Storia della Democrazia Cristiana, I: 1943–1948: le origini: la DC dalla resistenza alla repubblica* (Rome, 1987), pp. 205–29; E.-F. Callot, *Le mouvement républicain populaire: un parti politique de la démocratie chrétienne en France: origine, structure, doctrine, programme et action politique* (Paris, 1978), p. 139.

<sup>16</sup> The concept of militant democracy was coined by Karl Loewenstein in 1937, based on the assumption that democratic states need institutional mechanisms to guard themselves against anti-democratic threats: K. Loewenstein, ‘Militant democracy and fundamental rights I’, *American Political Science Review*, 31 (1937), pp. 417–32; K. Loewenstein, ‘Militant democracy and fundamental rights II’, *American Political Science Review*, 31 (1937), pp. 638–58.

<sup>17</sup> See the standard work on the elections: R. Ventresca, *From fascism to democracy: culture and politics in the Italian elections of 1948* (Toronto, 2004).

<sup>18</sup> A. Giovagnoli, *Il partito italiano: la Democrazia cristiana dal 1942 al 1994* (Bari, 1996), p. 56.

<sup>19</sup> A. B. Dentì, ‘La strategia anticomunista americana e la sinistra Dc durante la prima amministrazione Eisenhower’, *Studi storici*, 46 (2005), pp. 661–710.

<sup>20</sup> A. Vittoria, *Storia del PCI* (Rome, 2006), p. 70. For the problems of founding the Italian republic on anti-fascism in the face of the communist contribution to the Italian resistance, see P. Scoppola, *La repubblica dei partiti: evoluzione e crisi di un sistema politico* (Bologna, 1997), p. 131.

defined democracy in terms of anti-Marxism and not only pointed to the ties between the Italian communists and Moscow, but also to the alleged similarities between communism and fascism to underline its view that the PCI was an undemocratic party. Scelba claimed that '[t]he fall of fascism and Nazism did not diminish the polemics against democracy, polemics that we find nowadays in communism'.<sup>21</sup>

The DC believed in the necessity to protect Italian democracy against a potential communist take-over, and consequently developed the concept of a *democrazia protetta*, a 'protected democracy' in the early 1950s.<sup>22</sup> Although neo-fascism was also officially targeted, this 'protection' of democracy focused especially on communism, and in the words of Scelba consisted of the imperative

for democratic parties, for all citizens who are not communists, to consider the communist party for what it is: an anti-democratic movement that serves democracy only to establish a totalitarian regime, and of the natural consequence, that in order to prevent democratic suicide, we cannot, at least not in terms of political values, treat communism like other parties.<sup>23</sup>

In order to 'protect' Italian democracy, De Gasperi left open the possibility of suppression of press freedom, while at the DC's 1952 party congress proposals were made to enact ad hoc legislation against the communist party.<sup>24</sup>

Both suggestions were ultimately rejected, however, and the central element of the *democrazia protetta* became the assertion of the primacy of parliamentary politics and the securing of the DC's parliamentary majority. This growing equation of democracy with the parliamentary majority was illustrated for instance by series of laws diminishing the possibility for workers' organization and strikes, since these allegedly undermined parliamentary politics.<sup>25</sup> It also meant a postponement of the promises made in the Italian constitution foreseeing in legislation enabling referenda and increased autonomy for the Italian regions. De Gasperi claimed that since the constitution was intended to last for centuries, its promises could 'wait a few years' before being implemented.<sup>26</sup> He held that democracy was 'founded on this principle: the majority has the responsibility and the minority controls'. This majoritarian conception of democracy was so dear to him that De Gasperi even asserted that the parliamentary majority was more decisive than the value of the constitution when it came to defining

<sup>21</sup> Scelba, *Solidarietà nazionale e coscienza democratica*, p. 12.

<sup>22</sup> A. De Gasperi, 'Le ragioni di una politica anticomunista' (1951), in A. De Gasperi, *Scritti politici di Alcide de Gasperi* (Milan, 1979), pp. 365–370, at p. 370. See also G. Galli, *Storia della DC, 1943–1993: mezzo secolo di Democrazia cristiana* (Rome, 2007), p. 73.

<sup>23</sup> M. Scelba, *La distensione e la responsabilità dei democratici* (Rome, 1955), p. 26.

<sup>24</sup> S. Lupo, *Partito e antipartito: storia politica della prima repubblica* (Rome, 2004), p. 98.

<sup>25</sup> For an overview of the laws, which were interpreted as anti-communist, see for instance G. Scarpari, *La Democrazia cristiana e le leggi eccezionali, 1950–1953* (Milan, 1977).

<sup>26</sup> A. de Gasperi, 'Costituzione e riforma elettorale' (1952), in De Gasperi, *Scritti politici*, pp. 383–6, at p. 383.

what democracy was ultimately about.<sup>27</sup> Given that the DC from 1946 onwards always enjoyed the relative majority in the Italian parliament, only the DC could allegedly embody democracy in the country: the other parties ‘could only be allies, were always replaceable’, which ultimately led to the party’s assertion that ‘the DC is Italian democracy’.<sup>28</sup>

The DC’s conception of democracy in terms of anti-Marxism and the parliamentary majority found its most visible expression in the electoral law adopted in the run-up to the 1953 elections, which allotted two-thirds of the parliamentary seats to any party or coalition of parties that obtained more than 50 per cent of the vote – and which still divides historians on the question whether it was fully democratic.<sup>29</sup> For the DC, this was certainly the case, because the ‘majority of the Italian people is afraid of totalitarianism,...they feel that the events of Prague were no incident, that the horrors of Nazi repression have only recently passed away and can come back. All these facts contribute to the will to resist absolutely to the Bolshevik danger’ and made it necessary, in the words of De Gasperi, to construct ‘a dike against totalitarianism’.<sup>30</sup> After the DC and its allies missed the 50 per cent hurdle, the law would be annulled one year later. But the conviction that only the DC in government could safeguard Italian democracy would be persistent throughout the decade – and beyond.

The political debate in West Germany showed many resemblances to the one in Italy. The major parties shared an understanding that the Bonn Republic should be defended against potential anti-democratic forces,<sup>31</sup> but disagreed over the questions how and, perhaps more importantly, against whom democracy should be defended. This mutual denial of democratic legitimacy between SPD and CDU began right after the war, in disparate explanations for the collapse of the Weimar Republic and the responsibility of the SPD and the ‘bourgeois’ parties in this regard.<sup>32</sup> In this debate, the West German Christian democrats conceptualized democracy akin to their Italian sister party: they conceptualized the defence of democracy primarily in terms of

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 384.

<sup>28</sup> Galli, *Storia della DC, 1943–1993*, p. 74. My emphasis.

<sup>29</sup> Compare for instance P. Ginsborg, *A history of contemporary Italy: society and politics, 1943–1980* (New York, NY, 2003), p. 140; G. Bedeschi, *La prima repubblica (1946–1993): storia di una democrazia difficile* (Rome, 2013), p. 87; F. Malgeri, ‘De Gasperi e l’età del centrismo (1948–1954)’, in F. Malgeri, ed., *Storia della Democrazia Cristiana, II: De Gasperi e l’età del Centrismo* (Rome, 1987), pp. 3–249, at p. 177.

<sup>30</sup> A. de Gasperi, ‘La legge maggioritaria: la DC e la dottrina sociale cattolica’ (1953), in De Gasperi, *Scritti politici*, pp. 392–6, at p. 393. The law was also criticized from within the DC, see for instance Galli, *Storia della DC, 1943–1993*, p. 134.

<sup>31</sup> V. Otto, *Das Staatsverständnis des Parlamentarischen Rates: Ein Beitrag zur Entstehungsgeschichte des Grundgesetzes für die Bundesrepublik Deutschland* (Düsseldorf, 1971), pp. 150–1. This legislation against anti-democratic parties was inherited from the Allied forces; see D. E. Rogers, ‘Transforming the German party system: the United States and the origins of political moderation, 1945–1949’, *Journal of Modern History*, 65 (1993), pp. 512–41.

<sup>32</sup> S. Ullrich, *Der Weimar-Komplex: Das Scheitern der ersten deutschen Demokratie und die politische Kultur der frühen Bundesrepublik* (Göttingen, 2009), pp. 117–43.



the Cold War rather than that of anti-fascism and consequently questioned the democratic credentials of the Left-wing opposition, they equated democracy with the primacy of the parliamentary majority, and considered themselves responsible for guiding the democratic development of the country.

As was the case in Italy, a period of co-operation in constitution signing was therefore followed by the delegitimation of the democratic credentials of the main opposition party. The Christian democrats linked the notion of militant democracy explicitly to the use of state institutions to defend the Bonn Republic.<sup>33</sup> Adenauer's assertion was that the Cold War was also a domestic conflict and that not only the democratic credentials of the West German communist party but also the SPD's allegiance to the West German institutional outline deserved to be questioned. Adenauer excluded the SPD from an eventual Grand Coalition since he held that this would be unfeasible given the harsh election campaigns between the parties in which he instilled fears for the 'Marxist' SPD, claiming that 'All Marxist roads lead to Moscow.'<sup>34</sup> He referred to the SPD as only 'ostensibly a democratic party' that was still inspired by the dogmatic principles it had formulated in the 1920s.<sup>35</sup> The threat the SPD allegedly posed to West German democracy was even more boldly put by the Bavarian Christian Social Union (CSU). The party claimed, referring to the SPD, that the CSU 'fights the large battle against socialism', since there was allegedly an actual risk that socialists in office would 'open the door to a command economy and mass socializations' and 'turn the *Heimat* into a red regime'.<sup>36</sup>

A particularly sensitive topic in the debate on democracy was the orientation of Bonn's foreign policy. With the onset of the Cold War, West Germany was also militarily integrated in the West and was expected to contribute to its own military defence. Given the sensitivity of rearmament in post-war Germany, Adenauer explicitly linked it to the domestic policy of defending democracy, claiming that 'if the German people wants to be free, it should also be prepared to make sacrifices'.<sup>37</sup> Based on the assumption that the defence of democratic institutions at home and West Germany's integration into the West were inextricably linked, the Christian democrats posited that the Marxist SPD could not be counted upon to defend recently won democratic freedoms in the face of a Soviet threat. It was in the words of Adenauer

<sup>33</sup> On the different conceptions of militant democracy of CDU and SPD, see for instance K. Hanshew, *Terror and democracy in West Germany* (Cambridge, 2012), ch. 1.

<sup>34</sup> K. Sontheimer, *Die Adenauer Ära: Grundlegung der Bundesrepublik* (Munich, 2003), p. 72.

<sup>35</sup> K. Adenauer, 'Ansprache vor dem Vorstand und den Vorsitzenden der Kreisparteien der CDU Rheinland und Westfalen in Bonn' (1952), in K. Adenauer, *Reden, 1917–1967: Eine Auswahl* (Stuttgart, 1975), pp. 201–16, at p. 201.

<sup>36</sup> CSU, *Wahlprogramm* (1949), found on [www.hss.de/fileadmin/migration/downloads/BTW\\_1949-08-14.pdf](http://www.hss.de/fileadmin/migration/downloads/BTW_1949-08-14.pdf), created in 2009.

<sup>37</sup> Adenauer, 'Ansprache vor dem Vorstand und den Vorsitzenden der Kreisparteien der CDU', p. 216.



'undemocratic' that the SPD appealed to the Federal Constitutional Court to thwart the rearmament of West Germany and its accession to the European Defence Treaty, and the same counted for the SPD's objections to the Council of Europe, the Schuman plan, military subscription, and its endorsement of a neutral foreign policy.<sup>38</sup> The fact that the East German communist party encouraged West Germans to vote SPD for Adenauer only added to the questionable democratic credentials of the social democrats and strengthened his claim that only the Christian democrats embodied democracy in West Germany. The SPD's objections to Western military alliances allegedly made the party an enemy of a free and democratic order, while for the CDU the West and democracy had become inextricably linked.<sup>39</sup>

Like their Italian counterparts, the West German Christian democratic governments also took concrete measures to 'defend' democracy and strengthen the Christian democrat position in the parliamentary system. These measures included the introduction of the 5 per cent electoral threshold for parliamentary elections, failed attempts to install a majority voting system as well as, like in Italy, limitations on the freedom to strike.<sup>40</sup> Most notably, these measures comprised the outlawing of both the neo-Nazi Socialist Reichs Party and West German communist party (KPD), which was the parliament's fourth largest force. It was very much communist ideology that was being ultimately tested in court, showing that the defence of democracy extended to the question of who was entitled to call itself democratic. For the Adenauer government, the KPD's proclaimed allegiance to Marxism-Leninism had a very practical implication since it implied revolution, which made the communists irreconcilable with democracy.<sup>41</sup> The Federal Constitutional Court would indeed outlaw the party in 1956, making the Federal Republic the only Western European state to outlaw a communist party, a decision by some historians deemed 'unnecessary' with the benefit of hindsight.<sup>42</sup>

In comparison with West Germany, and to a lesser extent Italy, the French Fourth Republic lacked the institutional means to defend democracy.<sup>43</sup> But this did not preclude French political parties from disputing each other's conceptions of democracy. The socialist party (SFIO) was the party which identified

<sup>38</sup> See for instance K. Adenauer, 'Rede auf der Schlußkundgebung des Landesparteitag der CDU im Messehaus Nürnberg' (1957), in Adenauer, *Reden, 1917-1967*, pp. 366-72, at p. 367.

<sup>39</sup> E. Wolfrum, *Die geglüchte Demokratie: Geschichte der Bundesrepublik Deutschland von ihren Anfang bis zur Gegenwart* (Bonn, 2006), pp. 112-13.

<sup>40</sup> See for instance M. Görtemacher, *Geschichte der Bundesrepublik: Von Gründung bis zum Gegenwart* (Munich, 1999), p. 74. For the comments about the right to strike, see K. Adenauer, 'Mitbestimmung' (1951), in K. Adenauer, *Bundestagreden* (Bonn, 1972), p. 80.

<sup>41</sup> *Verfahren gegen die KPD vor dem Bundesverfassungsgericht: Die Rechtsgrundlagen* (Bonn, 1955), pp. 13-15.

<sup>42</sup> Wolfrum, *Die geglüchte Demokratie*, p. 67.

<sup>43</sup> On the parliamentary debates on the question of a constitutional court, see for instance Facon, *La IVe République*, pp. 62-82.

most strongly with the Fourth Republic,<sup>44</sup> claiming, not unlike Christian democrats in Italy and West Germany, that a change of government equalled jeopardizing democratic government. As a consequence, the party contested the democratic credentials of both communists and Gaullists: French democracy was allegedly ‘caught between a communist dictatorship and a neo-fascist regime based on personal power’.<sup>45</sup>

Like the Italian communists, the French communist party (PCF) had contributed to the signing of the Fourth Republic’s constitution, which only marginally passed a referendum before it was ratified. But once excluded from government, the PCF waged fundamental opposition and its democratic credentials were questioned. Léon Blum, a prominent socialist who had been prime minister during the era of the Popular Front, now denounced the communists as ‘foreign agents who want to install a dictatorship’.<sup>46</sup> However, French political parties could not unite against communism, since the government coalition was also attacked from the side of the Gaullists. Although De Gaulle’s launch of his political movement *Rassemblement du peuple français* (RPF) was motivated also by anti-communism, it was as much triggered by his opposition to the Fourth Republic.<sup>47</sup> The Gaullist challenging of the democratic legitimacy of the Fourth Republic, perhaps most eloquently put in a series of speeches in 1946–7, met with fierce resistance from the political leaders of the government parties, including the Christian democrats, who all claimed that De Gaulle posed a threat to French democracy.<sup>48</sup>

The differences in the way democracy was conceptualized between these self-proclaimed ‘republican’ forces and De Gaulle was portrayed by the socialists as the dichotomy between democracy and personal power.<sup>49</sup> It centred on the balance of power. Although De Gaulle put forward his conception of democracy as a perfect example of the *trias politica*, the SFIO claimed it was a negation of parliamentary and republican politics in the French tradition. The party not only emphasized the importance of parliament, but also claimed that no other representative institutions could claim to express the will of the people. Blum denounced a Gaullist-proposed constitutional court as undemocratic

<sup>44</sup> A. Bergounioux and G. Grunberg, *Le long remords du pouvoir: le Parti socialiste français, 1905–1992* (Paris, 1992), p. 162.

<sup>45</sup> G. Mollet, ‘Participation au gouvernement Mendès France?’ (1954), in G. Mollet, *Textes choisis: le socialiste et le républicain, 1945–1975* (Paris, 1975), pp. 83–94.

<sup>46</sup> L. Blum, ‘Communisme et Gaullisme’ (1948), in L. Blum, *L’œuvre de Léon Blum (1947–1950): la fin des alliances, la troisième force, politique Européenne, pour la justice* (Paris, 1963), pp. 239–44.

<sup>47</sup> C. d’Abzac-Épezy et al., *Charles de Gaulle et le Rassemblement du Peuple Français, 1947–1955* (Paris, 1998), pp. 849–51.

<sup>48</sup> F. Broche, *Une histoire des antigauillismes des origines à nos jours* (Paris, 2007), pp. 294–5.

<sup>49</sup> L. Blum, ‘L’intervention du De Gaulle et le referendum du 13 Octobre 1946’ (1946), in L. Blum, *L’œuvre de Léon Blum: naissance de la Quatrième République: la vie du parti et la doctrine socialiste, 1945–1947* (Paris, 1958), pp. 304–32, at p. 305.

since this court could potentially veto laws that were expressed by the people – and the people's preference should clearly gain preference.<sup>50</sup> Moreover, he believed that governments should 'mirror' the national assembly: this would be the guarantee of popular sovereignty and thus of democracy.<sup>51</sup> De Gaulle argued exactly the opposite: if the government 'mirrored' parliament, in other words was elected by it rather than appointed by the president, legislative and executive power could never be truly separated.<sup>52</sup> In the eyes of the SFIO, De Gaulle's conception of democracy allegedly not truly separated the executive from the legislative branch of the state, since parliament, once elected, would see its tasks limited to signing off legislation that the government proposed. Democracy was threatened, according to Blum, not by what De Gaulle called an 'omnipotent assembly', but by a too powerful executive. That is why the republic should be founded upon the principle of the sovereignty of a unicameral assembly and the responsibility of the government before the assembly.<sup>53</sup> These conceptions of democracy were considered incompatible with each other: if the Gaullists were able to pursue their plans to overthrow the Fourth Republic, Léon Blum claimed that in France 'there will be no longer the reality of a democracy, no longer the reality of a republic'.<sup>54</sup>

To conclude, both the way in which government parties conceptualized democracy and the way in which they claimed to defend it showed many similarities across borders. In all countries, governments targeted the opposition with which they had often only recently collaborated in the writings of post-war constitutions as undemocratic. In West Germany and Italy, and to a lesser extent in France as well, this was contingent upon the tensions created by the Cold War, in which questioning the principles of the Western alliance and the economic system generated doubts about democratic legitimacy. In conceptualizing democracy, government parties all equated democracy with the politics of the parliamentary majority, but while in France references to popular sovereignty were frequently made, Christian democrats in Italy and West Germany enjoyed a formal, predominantly political, conception of democracy, in which democracy denoted anti-Marxism and the primacy of the parliamentary majority, rather than the development of a set of socio-cultural or socio-economic practices.

<sup>50</sup> L. Blum, 'La constitution' (1946), in Blum, *L'œuvre de Léon Blum: naissance de la Quatrième République*, pp. 144–57, at p. 147.

<sup>51</sup> L. Blum, 'La démission du général De Gaulle et le gouvernement Félix Gouin' (1946), in Blum, *L'œuvre de Léon Blum: naissance de la Quatrième République*, pp. 158–73, at p. 166.

<sup>52</sup> See most famously C. De Gaulle, 'Discours prononcé à Bayeux' (1946), in C. De Gaulle, *Discours et messages: dans l'attente, 1946–1958* (Paris, 1970), pp. 5–11.

<sup>53</sup> 'L. Blum, 'Les problèmes constitutionnelles' (1946), in Blum, *L'œuvre de Léon Blum: naissance de la Quatrième République*, pp. 217–24, at p. 219.

<sup>54</sup> L. Blum, 'Motion pour un congrès extraordinaire de la S.F.I.O.' (1947), in Blum, *L'œuvre de Léon Blum (1947–1950)*, pp. 109–13, at p. 111. This is also the judgement of many historians, see for instance J. P. Rioux, *The Fourth Republic, 1944–1958* (Cambridge, 1987), p. 61.

## III

Whereas the parties in government claimed to defend the democratic order, those in opposition accused them of jeopardizing the precarious process of post-war democratization. This section illustrates how opposition parties understood democracy, focusing first on France, and then on Italy and West Germany.

The French liberal intellectual Raymond Aron noted that the French political constellation had no international equivalent.<sup>55</sup> He observed that government parties not only considered the opposition a threat to democracy and vice versa, but that the opposition was also internally divided between communists and Gaullists on the question how to conceptualize democracy. The PCF positioned itself as defender of the Fourth Republic, aided by the fact that its conception of democracy at least in institutional terms overlapped with that of the parties in government. The PCF consequently claimed that the country faced a choice, 'democracy or fascism', with the latter option being represented by De Gaulle.<sup>56</sup> The PCF therefore aimed to ally itself with the socialists, based on the assumption that working-class unity was, as in the 1930s, necessary in the face of the threats posed to democracy.<sup>57</sup> As was the case for the Left in West Germany and Italy, democracy's perceived struggles were from the perspective of the Left predominantly seen through the perspective of anti-fascism, rather than that of the Cold War.

Ultimately more serious was the challenge launched by the Gaullists. Despite the government coalition's efforts to present themselves as saviours of the French republican model, their conception of democracy was continuously questioned by De Gaulle and the RPF.<sup>58</sup> De Gaulle argued that political parties were antagonistic to democracy, which was problematic since the Fourth Republic's constitution ensured 'that these parties have at their discretion directly and without counterweight all the powers of the Republic'.<sup>59</sup> He proposed a different institutional outline, which resembled ideas that had been aired in resistance circles close to the general during the war.<sup>60</sup> For De Gaulle, judicial, legislative, and executive power should be 'firmly balanced' and separated. His plans curbed the powers of a directly elected parliament: its task was to deliberate on laws and approve the budget, but should not be involved in governing the country. The prime minister was to be appointed

<sup>55</sup> R. Aron, *Le grand schisme* (Paris, 1948), p. 225.

<sup>56</sup> J. Duclos, *On ne peut voter pour la paix sans voter pot les candidats présentés par le Parti Communiste Français* (Paris, 1952), p. 24.

<sup>57</sup> S. Courtois and M. Lazar, *Histoire du Parti communiste français* (Paris, 1995), p. 352.

<sup>58</sup> See for instance J. P. Rioux, 'De Gaulle in waiting', in H. Hough and J. Horne, eds., *De Gaulle and twentieth-century France* (London, 1995), pp. 35–49.

<sup>59</sup> C. de Gaulle, 'Discours prononcé à 'Épinal' (1946), in De Gaulle, *Discours et messages*, pp. 26–33, at p. 31.

<sup>60</sup> Comité General d'Études, 'Le problème constitutionnelle français' (1944), in H. Michel and B. Mirkine-Geutzévitch, eds., *Les idées politiques et sociales de le résistance* (Paris, 1954), pp. 287–97, at p. 293.

by the president to ensure this separation of powers. Parliamentary influence was also balanced by a corporatist Second Chamber which was not to be elected directly, but made up of representatives of economic, financial, local, and intellectual life.<sup>61</sup> The powerful head of state should be elected by a 'large body of voters', i.e. not by parliament to prevent him or her from becoming involved in party struggle. He was finally in favour of the use of referenda, something that the political parties opposed as 'plebiscites'.<sup>62</sup>

While Blum had claimed that a system in which the people freely and directly elected their representatives by means of political parties was fully democratic, De Gaulle claimed the opposite: the political parties created political divisions and would cause 'anarchy' and 'tyranny'.<sup>63</sup> De Gaulle explicitly presented himself as the protector of a democratic republic against the 'separatists' of political parties.<sup>64</sup> It was by means of this representation of the people as a whole, and by governing in the general interest, that De Gaulle claimed to be the true democrat.<sup>65</sup> The Gaullist conception of democracy, with a powerful head of state, a corporatist Second Chamber, and most of all its aversion of political parties, was an anomaly among political actors in the 1950s. But the way in which De Gaulle challenged the conceptions of democracy held by parties in government saw similarities across borders.

The way in which the Left-wing opposition in Italy and the West challenged the democratic credentials of the Christian democrats showed important similarities. The opposition forces in both countries were nonetheless of a different nature. In Italy, the communists and socialists had jointly fought the 1948 election, but in the 1950s the socialists (PSI) increasingly followed the line of 'autonomy' from the PCI.<sup>66</sup> The PCI was the main opposition party during the 1950s and was characterized by the so-called *doppiezza*: the duality of its simultaneous allegiance to the Italian constitution and the Soviet Union.<sup>67</sup> It still divides Italian historiography between those who argue that the *doppiezza* was mainly PCI leader Palmiro Togliatti's rhetoric to control the party's militants while being true to the party's commitment to parliamentary democracy, and those who hold that the party in due time really aimed to overcome the institutional framework.<sup>68</sup> It touches right upon the question of who was actually the

<sup>61</sup> De Gaulle, 'Discours prononcé à Bayeux', p. 8.

<sup>62</sup> V. Alibert-Fabre, 'La pensée constitutionnelle du général de Gaulle à "l'épreuve des circonstances"', *Revue française de science politique*, 40 (1990), pp. 699–713, at p. 702.

<sup>63</sup> De Gaulle, 'Discours prononcé à Épinal', p. 29.

<sup>64</sup> C. de Gaulle, 'Discours prononcé à Vincennes' (1947), in De Gaulle, *Discours et messages*, pp. 122–8, at p. 127.

<sup>65</sup> C. de Gaulle, 'Déclaration' (1947), in De Gaulle, *Discours et Messages*, pp. 135–7.

<sup>66</sup> M. Degl'Innocenti, *Storia del PSI* (3 vols., Bari, 1993), III, p. 224.

<sup>67</sup> See the standard work P. Di Loreto, *Togliatti e la 'Doppiezza': il PCI tra democrazia e insurrezione, 1944–1949* (Bologna, 1991).

<sup>68</sup> See for instance A. Agosti, "'Partito nuovo" e "democrazia progressiva" nell'elaborazioni dei comunisti', in C. Framsceschini, S. Guerrieri, and G. Monina, eds., *Le idee costituzionali della resistenza. Atti del convegno di studi: Roma 19, 20 e 21 ottobre 1995* (Rome, 1995), pp. 235–48;

most democratic force in Italy, providing Christian democrats with the perfect reason to declare the party undemocratic, while the PCI not only pointed to its contribution to the post-war constitution, but also to its leading role in the Italian resistance to prove its democratic credentials.<sup>69</sup> The West German SPD was by contrast marked by anti-communism, fostered by the conflict between the communists and the SPD in the Weimar Republic. Simultaneously, the party followed a course of what has been labelled ‘intransigent opposition’ to the Adenauer governments,<sup>70</sup> based on the SPD’s judgement that the CDU was a mere successor to the conservative *Zentrum* party of the Weimar era.<sup>71</sup> Although firmly committed to the Basic Law, the party remained ambiguous on its Marxist inspirations.

Despite these different positions on the political continuum and the fact that the political climate in Italy was far more repressive, both for citizens and the political opposition,<sup>72</sup> these Left-wing opposition parties conceptualized democracy in similar ways. Both in Italy and West Germany, they considered themselves the true democrats of their countries and delegitimized the practices and conceptions of Christian democrat democracy. For the SPD in West Germany and the Left-wing opposition in Italy, three aspects characterized their contribution to the debate on democracy: stressing the continuity between Christian democracy and fascism; underlining the perceived lack of social preconditions for democracy, thereby denying the link between democracy and capitalism; and, lastly, challenging the measures with which the Christian democratic parties claimed to ‘defend’ democracy as undemocratic.

Other than the Christian democratic parties, the opposition continued to perceive the struggle between democrats and anti-democrats in the 1950s from the perspective of anti-fascism, rather than that of the Cold War. In his famous speech in Salerno in 1944, Togliatti, returning from an eighteen-year-long exile in the Soviet Union, stated that the communists not only aimed for the destruction of fascism, but also of the conditions that had made the rise of fascism possible.<sup>73</sup> Both the Italian and the West German Left argued that these conditions had been caused by capitalism, and, consequently, that a truly transformed democracy could not be capitalist. It is obvious that this

---

P. McCarthy, *The crisis of the Italian state: from the origins of the Cold War to the fall of Berlusconi and beyond* (New York, NY, 1997), ch. 1.

<sup>69</sup> S. Pons, *L'impossibile egemonia: l'URSS, il PCI e le origine della guerra fredda (1943–1948)* (Rome, 1999), p. 38.

<sup>70</sup> G. D. Drummond, *The German social democrats in opposition, 1949–1960* (Norman, OK, 1982), p. 29.

<sup>71</sup> D. Orlow, ‘Delayed reaction: democracy, nationalism, and the SPD, 1945–1966’, *German Studies Review*, 16 (1993), pp. 77–102, at p. 80.

<sup>72</sup> The party feared for the life of Togliatti in the 1950s and considered bringing the leader to safety abroad. See Vittoria, *Storia del PCI*, p. 70. Police gunfire killed over 100 protesters in the period between 1945 and 1960 in Italy. See D. Della Porta, *Social movements, political violence and the state: a comparative analysis of Italy and Germany* (Cambridge, 1995), p. 58.

<sup>73</sup> Di Loreto, *Togliatti e la ‘Doppiezza’*, p. 22.

counted for the Italian socialists and communists, but also Schumacher held that ‘in the current social order we cannot build a viable democracy’.<sup>74</sup> Consequently, he stated that ‘as socialists we battle for the overcoming of capitalism’.<sup>75</sup>

It demonstrates that democracy for Christian democrats and the Left in the 1950s had different meanings on a key aspect, with the Left seeing capitalism and the social inequality it generated as antagonistic to democracy. For the Christian democrats, capitalism and democracy were inextricably linked. Ludwig Erhard, the CDU economics minister, claimed that when West Germany switched from a command economy to a market economy, ‘we did more than taking an economic measure, we put the community and the society on new foundations: denouncing tyranny, totalitarianism and intolerance’.<sup>76</sup> But for the Italian Left and the SPD, capitalism was still seen as the system which had caused the rise of fascism. The socio-economic reforms of the Christian democratic governments were therefore not sufficient to transform and protect democracy against the influence of big capital. Schumacher called the CDU’s notion of the social market economy ‘nonsense, like *Blut und Boden* nonsense was’.<sup>77</sup> Capitalism and democracy were incompatible for him.<sup>78</sup>

The SPD, PSI, and PCI asserted that the Christian democratic governments impeded a clear break with the past. They contended that the Christian democratic governments were supported by the same circle of power which had supported fascism. Schumacher claimed that the CDU government had ‘the character of the Austrian Dolfuß-Schussnigg fascists’, since it was allegedly supported by the ‘four-fold connection between capitalism, cartels, clericalism and conservatism’.<sup>79</sup> Very much in the same spirit, the Italian Left claimed that Italy was thanks to the DC not a ‘republic founded on labour’ – as is the first article of the Italian constitution – but a state which waged ‘a cold war against workers’.<sup>80</sup> Echoing the critique of Schumacher, the prominent Italian socialist Lelio Basso claimed that the DC in Italy took power ‘supported by the same forces of big capital that exercised the March on Rome’ and that Italy currently

<sup>74</sup> K. Schumacher, ‘Die Aufgabe der Opposition’ (1949), in Schumacher, *Turmwächter der Demokratie*, pp. 166–85, at p. 176.

<sup>75</sup> K. Schumacher, ‘Politik macht man nicht mit der Beinen, sondern mit dem Kopf’ (1952), in Schumacher, *Turmwächter der Demokratie*, pp. 503–6.

<sup>76</sup> L. Erhard, ‘Marktwirtschaft im Streit der Meinungen’ (1948), in Erhard, *Gedanken aus fünf Jahrzehnten*, pp. 134–52, at p. 134.

<sup>77</sup> K. Schumacher, ‘Um die Lebensnotwendigkeit des Volkes’ (1950), in Schumacher, *Turmwächter der Demokratie*, pp. 186–220, at p. 198.

<sup>78</sup> K. Schumacher, ‘Von der Freiheit zur sozialen Gerechtigkeit’ (1948), in Schumacher, *Turmwächter der Demokratie*, pp. 111–38, at p. 137.

<sup>79</sup> Schumacher, ‘Um die Lebensnotwendigkeit des Volkes’, p. 205.

<sup>80</sup> P. Togliatti, *Per un governo di dissensione di riforme sociale e di pace: rapporto al Consiglio Nazionale del P.C.I. del 15 aprile 1953* (Rome, 1953).



witnessed a 'return to the triangle of power' which had supported fascism: bureaucracy, big capital, and the church.<sup>81</sup>

In order to transform the post-war states into 'true' democracies, forces on the Left argued that democracy should denote more than the will of the parliamentary majority and the rule of law: democracy also meant active civic participation, social equality, and the overcoming of capitalism. This conceptualization of democracy was visible among the Left in all three states,<sup>82</sup> but was perhaps most eloquently formulated by Giuseppe Saragat, leader of the Italian social democrats. Saragat distinguished between 'political' and 'true' democracy. Political democracy was merely a formal democracy, with basic democratic rights such as the right to vote and freedom of association. This form was considered but a prerequisite before the truly democratic and socialist society could be developed: 'without political democracy, in its most liberal sense, which entails more than merely the government of the majority, the socialist society can never be formed'.<sup>83</sup> Only in the second phase of democratic development would there be the combination of political liberties with social equality. In this 'true democracy' the people participated actively in what was called 'the life of the state', making democracy a way of life rather than merely a set of institutions.<sup>84</sup>

This Left-wing conception of democracy stood at the basis of virulent critique on the democratic credentials of the Christian democrats in government. In West Germany, the SPD emphasized the importance of constructing democracy also on the level of society and stressed a more participatory form of democracy in opposition to the model of the CDU.<sup>85</sup> It was, in other words, in favour of a 'democratization' of society, while the CDU denounced this as a threat to freedom.<sup>86</sup> In Italy, Basso warned that the DC's majoritarian conception of democracy was potentially authoritarian, because it effectively meant a despotism of the majority. Since the DC governments had, moreover, done little to realize the promises of the constitution on local autonomy, independence of the judiciary, and referenda, to check the power of the parliamentary majority,

<sup>81</sup> L. Basso, *Due totalitarismi: Fascismo e democrazia cristiana* (Rome, 1951), p. 281.

<sup>82</sup> See for instance L. Blum, 'Notes d'Allemagne (1943–1945)', in L. Blum, *L'œuvre de Léon Blum V. 1940–1945 Mémoires de la prison et la procès: À l'échelle humaine* (Paris, 1955), pp. 500–14; Schumacher, 'Um die Lebensnotwendigkeit des Volkes', pp. 186–220.

<sup>83</sup> G. Saragat, 'La nostra democrazia' (1944), in G. Saragat, *Quaranta anni di lotta per la democrazia: scritti e discorsi, 1925–1965* (Rome, 1966), p. 254.

<sup>84</sup> Also the prominent socialist Lelio Basso claimed that in the current societal circumstances there could be 'no true democracy': Basso, *Due totalitarismi*, p. 258. For Left-wing claims to embody 'true democracy', see also for instance *Chi sono I nemici della patria e dell'indipendenza nazionale, i nemici della libertà e della democrazia?* (PCI, supplement to no. 6–7 of *Propaganda*, 1948), p. 21. Istituto Gramsci Rome, Archivio del PCI FD PCI Op. 2861 134170.

<sup>85</sup> The groundwork for such a more participatory conception of democracy had been laid by several public intellectuals after the War; see S. A. Forner, 'Für eine demokratische Erneuerung Deutschlands: Kommunikationsprozesse und Deutungsmuster engagierter Demokraten nach 1945', *Geschichte und Gesellschaft*, 33 (2007), pp. 228–57.

<sup>86</sup> K. Jarausch, *Die Umkehr: Deutsche Wandlungen, 1945–1995* (Munich, 2004), p. 189.

Italy was actually ‘undergoing a totalitarian evolution’.<sup>87</sup> The 1953 electoral Scelba law, or ‘swindle law’ as it was often referred to, was allegedly a copy of the Acerbo law of the Mussolini era and proved that for the DC, the constitution was not a sacred text, but ‘could be used to its own advantage’.<sup>88</sup> It was in this way that the PCI argued that the DC ‘violated every democratic principle’ and that the 1953 elections were about the defence of democracy – just as the DC claimed that they were.<sup>89</sup>

Finally, the Left also contested the Christian democrat presumption that integration in the West was a crucial aspect of democracy in the 1950s. Unsurprisingly, the Italian Left, until 1956 including the Italian socialist party, went furthest in this regard, simply positing that the Soviet Union equalled peace, while the United States embodied imperialism.<sup>90</sup> But the SPD’s stance on the CDU’s equation of democracy with integration in the West was equally hostile. While the CDU presented rearmament as necessary to protect West German democracy, the SPD argued the opposite. Both the content and the implementation of the rearmament law made the Federal Republic of Germany ‘take the road of an authoritarian state that negates democracy’.<sup>91</sup> Moreover, presenting political opponents as supporters of Bolshevik slavery was, according to Erich Ollenhauer, Schumacher’s successor, ‘lethal for the development of democracy and freedom.’<sup>92</sup>

The Left-wing opposition forces in West Germany and Italy were faithful to the post-war constitutions of their countries and committed to protect these constitutions against perceived dangers to the democratic order. From this perspective, the ‘militancy’ of post-war democracies lay in the resistance of the opposition against supposedly undemocratic government policies. Basso stated that in the face of the policies of the DC, the ‘defence of the constitutional order can only be entrusted to the Left’.<sup>93</sup> For Schumacher, it was only the opposition of the SPD that guaranteed democracy in the Federal Republic, since the government ‘has done nothing for the democratization of Germany, neither politically, nor on the level of the state, nor economically. On the

<sup>87</sup> Basso, *Due totalitarismi*, p. 258.

<sup>88</sup> Togliatti, *Per un governo di dissensione di riforme sociale e di pace*, p. 10.

<sup>89</sup> PCI, ‘Per un governo di pace e di riforme sociali: per una Italia democratica e indipendente’ (Rome, 1953), Istituto Gramsci, Rome, Archivio del PCI, F. Col. Op. 91 000071303. The DC claimed to protect liberty and the constitution in its election campaign manifesto, see: Democrazia Cristiana, ‘1 Maggio 1953: appello della Direzione della D. C. al Paese per le elezioni politiche’, in A. Damilano, ed., *Atti e documenti della Democrazia cristiana 1943–1967* (Rome, 1968), p. 608.

<sup>90</sup> Degl’Innocenti, *Storia del PSI*, p. 186.

<sup>91</sup> K. Schumacher, ‘Das Volk soll entscheiden! Für die deutsche Gleichberechtigung’ (1950), in K. Schumacher, *Reden – Schriften – Korrespondenzen, 1945–1952* (Berlin and Bonn, 1985), pp. 863–82, at p. 880.

<sup>92</sup> E. Ollenhauer, ‘Gemeinschaft der Freien und Gleichen’ (1952), in E. Ollenhauer, *Reden und Aufsätze* (Hannover, 1964), p. 216.

<sup>93</sup> P. Nenni, *Legge truffa e costituzione: ragioni dell’ostruzionismo socialista* (Milan, 1953), p. 14.

contrary, the state has nowadays unequivocally the character of an authoritarian state'.<sup>94</sup>

Opposition parties in West Germany, Italy, and France almost unanimously denied the democratic credentials of the parties in government. They challenged their conceptions of democracy in key aspects such as the role of political parties, the economic system, and crucial foreign policy choices. Especially the Left wing of the political spectrum in West Germany and Italy resembled each other in this regard, questioning the link between democracy and capitalism and claiming that more direct participation and social equality were inextricably linked to democracy. Conceptions of democracy of the government parties which emphasized negative liberty were challenged, as was the assertion that democracy was primarily parliamentary democracy: the SPD held that democracy was not merely a form of government, but should be practised on the level of society as well, while the Italian Left emphasized that democracy was not complete until the constitutional promises on referenda and regional autonomy had been realized.

#### IV

The three major continental European democracies did not see the emergence of a consensual order in which political elites shared similar conceptions of democracy in the decade following the Second World War. Below the surface of the often rather pompous rhetoric with which political parties denied each other's democratic credentials lay different and competing understandings of what democracy was and how it should be practised. In France, these differences lay in the appreciation of the constitution of the Fourth Republic and the question how a balance of power should be institutionalized. In West Germany and Italy, government and opposition forces were divided over questions of popular participation, integration in the West, and the socio-economic system – all of which were understood to be of central importance to the functioning of these transformed democracies. Consequently, all parties saw democracies in danger and were mistrustful of the democratic legitimacy of other political parties.

Government forces considered their continuing presence in government as the only way to safeguard democratic institutions, whereas opposition parties asserted that it was only thanks to their resistance to government policies that there were still democratic states. Because of these polarized debates, the 1950s were a transformative age in the formation of a convergence of these conceptions of democracy. This section discusses how these different conceptions of democracy clashed in political crises in all three states around the turn of

<sup>94</sup> K. Schumacher, 'Gesellschaftsumbau – ein Nationale Aufgabe' (1951), in Schumacher, *Turmwächter der Demokratie*, pp. 249–73, at p. 249.

the 1960s. It argues that these crises subsequently contributed to a process of convergence between these conceptions of democracy held by political parties.

The most famous example of the process of crisis and convergence of conceptions of democracy is of course France, where the Fourth Republic fell amidst fears that the war in Algeria would also disrupt France itself. Gaullist Michel Debré claimed at the time: ‘Our system of government can only lead to the destruction of France: the choice is by now “the regime or France”.’<sup>95</sup> The crisis came to a head in May 1958, when the army staged a coup in Algiers and President René Coty asked De Gaulle to form an emergency government. It was thus entangled with the decolonization of the French empire, but politicians at the time often viewed those crises as inter-related, believing that republican values failed to reign supreme in Paris as they did in Algiers.<sup>96</sup> The new constitution was presented as a compromise in the republican tradition, but strongly inspired by the Gaullist conception of democracy.<sup>97</sup>

It took years before De Gaulle’s antagonists on the Left accepted the new institutional outline of the Fifth Republic as fully democratic, with even future president François Mitterrand denouncing the Gaullist conception of power as a ‘permanent coup d’état’,<sup>98</sup> and claiming as late as 1973, when De Gaulle had already passed away, that the Fifth Republic was not democratic, but ‘seems a third system, favoured in many Latin American, African, South-East Asian countries and many European Mediterranean countries characterized by personal power’.<sup>99</sup> Nonetheless, the Fifth Republic is generally believed to have ultimately brought an unprecedented political agreement on democratic practices and institutions.<sup>100</sup> This process of convergence of conceptions of democracy held by the main political actors was epitomized by President Valéry Giscard d’Estaing, who in 1976 remarked that France was going through ‘a politically exceptionally stable period. Our institutions, established in 1958 and 1962 under the leadership of general De Gaulle, after having been violently fought over by a faction of the political forces, do no longer appear to be really contested.’<sup>101</sup>

In West Germany, a similar process of convergence of conceptions of democracy between CDU and SPD set in around the turn of the 1960s. On the one hand, this process was caused by a reconfiguration of the meaning of democracy by the SPD at the end of the 1950s.<sup>102</sup> As a result of continuing electoral

<sup>95</sup> M. Debré, *Ces princes qui nous gouvernent* (Paris, 1957), p. 79.

<sup>96</sup> M. Evans, *Algeria: France’s undeclared war* (Oxford, 2012), p. 155.

<sup>97</sup> N. Atkin, *The French Fifth Republic* (Basingstoke, 2005), pp. 40–2.

<sup>98</sup> F. Mitterrand, *Le coup d’état permanent* (Paris, 1964).

<sup>99</sup> F. Mitterrand, *La rose au poing* (Paris, 1973), p. 133.

<sup>100</sup> R. Vinen, ‘The Fifth Republic as parenthesis? Politics since 1945’, in J. McMillan, ed., *Modern France, 1880–2002* (Oxford, 2003), pp. 74–102; J. Jennings, *Revolution and the republic: a history of political thought in France since the eighteenth century* (Oxford, 2012), p. 568.

<sup>101</sup> V. Giscard d’Estaing, *Démocratie française* (Paris, 1976), p. 28.

<sup>102</sup> See in particular K. Schönhoven, *Wendjahre: die Sozialdemokratie in der Zeit der Großen Koalition, 1966–1969* (Bonn, 2004), pp. 36–50; B. W. Bouvier, *Zwischen Godesberg und Großer*

stagnation in a quickly modernizing society, the party took distance from its Marxist roots during the Godesberg Conference in 1959.<sup>103</sup> It endorsed a vision on democracy more in tune with that of the CDU, at least when it came to foreign policy and capitalism, seeing the latter no longer necessarily as antagonistic to democracy.<sup>104</sup> SPD prominent Carlo Schmid, who had previously remarked that he ‘could not rest until exploitative capitalism is brought to an end’,<sup>105</sup> now stated that democracy meant an ‘understanding between all sections of society’ and that socialism could only be reached through democracy.<sup>106</sup>

The convergence between CDU and SPD was further fostered by several crises which marked the end of the Adenauer era in the early 1960s. These demonstrated that also the CDU came to conceptualize democracy differently when it faced the limits of its previous habit to see itself as the embodiment of West German democracy. Most of all, this counted for the *Spiegel* Affair. In the view of Adenauer and CSU hardliner Franz Jozef Strauß, the arrest of several journalists who had published ostensibly classified information was a justified move in the defence of democracy in the context of the Cold War. Strauß stated that the freedom of expression was indeed a basic right, but one that had ‘to be balanced against all other rights’.<sup>107</sup> According to many observers, however, Strauß had misjudged this ‘balance’. For them, the question was not whether *Der Spiegel* had broken the law, but ‘if the Federal Republic is still a free and constitutional state’.<sup>108</sup> The affair therefore marked the extent until which the Christian democrat ‘defence’ of democracy was considered legitimate, strengthened reform-minded factions within the CDU, and led to an awareness among Christian democrats that democracy was also to be practised on the level of society rather than just as a form of state.<sup>109</sup> These changes meant an

---

*Koalition: der Weg der SPD in die Regierungsverantwortung außen-, sicherheits-, und deutschlandpolitische Umorientierung und gesellschaftliche Öffnung der SPD, 1960–1966* (Bonn, 1990).

<sup>103</sup> See for instance C. Nonn, ‘Das Godesberger Programm und die Krise des Ruhrbergbaus: Zum Wandel der deutschen Sozialdemokratie von Ollenhauer zu Brandt’, *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte*, 50 (2002), pp. 71–97.

<sup>104</sup> See for instance C. C. Hodge, ‘The long fifties: the politics of socialist programmatic revision in Britain, France and Germany’, *Contemporary European History*, 2 (1993), pp. 17–34.

<sup>105</sup> C. Schmid, ‘Weg und Ziel der Sozialdemokratie’ (1945), in C. Schmid, *Politik als geistige Aufgabe. Gesammelte Werke I* (Munich, 1973), pp. 13–37, at p. 26.

<sup>106</sup> C. Schmid, ‘Der ideologische Standort der deutschen Sozialismus in der Gegenwart’ (1958), in Schmid, *Politik als Geist*, pp. 245–78, at pp. 266–7.

<sup>107</sup> ‘Franz Jozef Strauß in einem Interview mit der Augsburger Allgemeine am 5. November 1962’, in A. Grosser and J. Seifert, eds., *Die Spiegel Affäre, 1: Die Staatsmacht und ihre Kontrolle: Texte und Dokumente zur Zeitgeschichte* (Olten und Freiburg im Breisgau, 1966), p. 492.

<sup>108</sup> ‘Kommentar der Süddeutsche Zeitung 8 November 1962’, in Grosser and Seifert, eds., *Die Spiegel Affäre*, pp. 449–50.

<sup>109</sup> H.-O. Kleinmann, *Geschichte der CDU* (Stuttgart, 1993), pp. 194–5; A. J. Nicholls, *The Bonn Republic: West German democracy, 1945–1990* (New York, NY, 1997), p. 172. Cf. Hanshew, *Terror and democracy in West Germany*.

increased mutual acceptance of the SPD and the Christian democrats as democrats and paved the way for a government coalition between them in the 1960s, something considered ‘unthinkable’ during the 1950s.<sup>110</sup>

Also in Italy, finally, conceptions of democracy commenced to converge from the turn of the 1960s onwards in a way similar to the process unfolding in West Germany. First, the Italian socialist party redefined its understanding of democracy. Especially after the Soviet crackdown of the Hungarian uprising in 1956, the PSI ever more sharply marked its independence from the PCI and the Soviet Union and fully embraced parliamentary democracy as an end in itself.<sup>111</sup> The party did not yet officially shed its Marxist inspirations, but unequivocally stated that it adopted only peaceful and parliamentary means to achieve socialism, claiming that ‘parliamentary democracy’ and ‘socialism’ were inextricably linked, and also muted its resistance to NATO.<sup>112</sup> This shift of the socialists paved the way for a government coalition with the DC which, albeit late, enacted legislation which realized socialist-democratic ideals such as referenda and regional autonomy.

This rapprochement only occurred after the Christian democrats ran into the limits of their claim to embody and protect Italian democracy. Most notably, this was the case when the DC government in 1960 depended on parliamentary support of the neo-fascist Italian Social Movement, which symbolized for the Italian Left the reactionary course Italian democracy had taken.<sup>113</sup> Former partisans staged protests against what they perceived as the government legitimization of neo-fascism, but these protests were brutally suppressed, leaving several protesters dead. The DC’s claim to defend democracy, like that of its West German sister party, thereby ultimately turned against the party itself, and forced the party to opt for collaboration with the socialists, a process which culminated in the centre-Left government formed in 1963.<sup>114</sup> The reciprocal acceptance of PSI and DC as democratic forces, however, further isolated the PCI. Only under the leadership of Enrico Berlinguer did the communists unequivocally distance themselves from the Soviet Union and embrace a conception of democracy more in touch with the other political parties.<sup>115</sup>

<sup>110</sup> Schönhoven, *Wendjahre*, p. 36.

<sup>111</sup> See also G. Crainz, *Storia del miracolo italiano: culture, identità, trasformazioni fra anni cinquanta e sessanta* (Rome, 2005), ch. 2.

<sup>112</sup> P. Nenni, ‘Al 32 Congresso’ (1957), in P. Nenni, *Il socialismo nella democrazia: realtà e presente* (Florence, 1966), pp. 5–44. See also S. M. di Scala, *Renewing Italian socialism: Nenni to Craxi* (Oxford, 1988), p. 133.

<sup>113</sup> L. Radi, *Tambroni trent’anni dopo: il luglio 1960 e la nascita del centrosinistra* (Bologna, 1990), p. 122.

<sup>114</sup> P. Cooke, *Luglio 1960: Tambroni e la repressione fallita* (Milan, 2000), p. 14.

<sup>115</sup> On the PCI’s quest for democratic legitimacy in the 1970s, see for instance S. Pons, *Berlinguer e la fine del comunismo* (Turin, 2006).

## V

This article has demonstrated that the three ‘transformed’ democracies of Western Europe were characterized by a polarized debate on the meaning of democracy. Although political parties continued to attack each other’s conceptions of democracy after the 1950s, the first fifteen years after the war saw particularly vehement disputes on the question of who could credibly claim to be a democrat. This raises the question how stable, uniform, and consensual the post-war democracies of Western Europe actually were.<sup>116</sup> This conclusion is dedicated to a discussion of these three assertions.

The debates on the meaning of democracy discussed here were not about policies, but touched upon the crucial issue who could claim political legitimacy in a continent scarred by the legacy of fascism and torn apart by the Cold War. As has been demonstrated here, this question determined the composition of coalition governments, with parties being excluded whose conceptions of politics were believed to be undemocratic. However, this mutual questioning of democratic legitimacy did not impede the 1950s from being at least politically a rather stable decade, but explanations for this stability should be sought in different spheres. Most importantly, despite high government turnover in France and Italy, governments continued to be dominated by the same parties in all three states, whether the fragile coalition of centre parties in France or the Christian democrats in the case of Italy and West Germany. This, rather than an agreement among political elites on the meaning of democracy, explains the relative political stability and continuity.

Based on the debates analysed at this place, a more ambivalent picture emerges concerning the alleged uniformity of democracy in post-war Western Europe. On the one hand, it would be easy to point to the similarities between the French, Italian, and West German democracies along the line in which historiography has often done this. All states were parliamentary regimes, they offered only limited possibilities of popular participation and emphasized negative liberties. But although this picture is not flawed, it is only partially accurate. As soon as the conceptions of democracy advocated by those in opposition are included, a different picture emerges which shows that many influential voices advocated enhanced modes of popular participation and a more positive conception of liberty and who, especially in France, questioned the importance of parliament. More differences can easily be discerned and an important one is the notion that ‘militant democracy’ was one

<sup>116</sup> The uniformity, stability, and consensus of post-war Western European democracies has been a recurrent theme in historiography; see the publications cited above in n. 2, as well as D. Sassoon, ‘Politics’, in M. Fulbrook, ed., *Europe since 1945* (Oxford, 2001), pp. 14–52; M. Conway and V. Depkat, ‘Towards a European history of the discourse of democracy: discussing democracy in Western Europe, 1945–1960’, in M. Conway and K. K. Patel, eds., *Europeanization in the twentieth century: historical approaches* (Basingstoke, 2010), pp. 132–56; D. W. Urwin, *A political history of Western Europe since 1945* (London, 1997), pp. 135–40.



of the defining characteristics of post-war democracies.<sup>117</sup> Although this certainly counts for West Germany,<sup>118</sup> this claim is much less valid for France, and Italy; the latter only saw the establishment of a constitutional court at the end of the 1950s,<sup>119</sup> and its task was fundamentally different from the one in West Germany. More fundamentally, this article has revealed that political parties in all three states far from agreed on the issue against whom democracy should be defended ‘militantly’. From the perspective of political ideas, the uniformity of democracy in Western Europe lay therefore much more in the transnational conceptions of democracy which this comparative study has emphasized. Although political parties addressed what they perceived as democratic problems in national arenas, Christian democrat, socialist, and communist conceptions of democracy often saw important similarities across national borders.

This leaves the assertion of the broad consensus of post-war Western European democracies, which this article has reconsidered. Right under the seemingly stable surface of coalition governments, political parties continuously questioned each other’s conceptions of democracy and democratic practices. While the Gaullists denied the democratic legitimacy of the Fourth Republic’s constitution, the Left-wing opposition in Italy and West Germany claimed that governments did not follow their countries’ democratic constitutions, which had been the result of a compromise between them and the Christian democrats: the Federal Republic’s Basic Law stated that West Germany was a ‘social federal state’, while the Italian constitution proclaimed that Italy was a ‘republic founded upon labour’. Rightly, these elements of democracy were felt to be missing in the 1950s by many on the Left.

In order to be susceptible to this contentious post-war debate on the meaning of democracy, it is essential to study all forces which called themselves democrats. This means that there are compelling reasons to include the communist parties of France and Italy in any analysis of democratic discourse in post-war Europe.<sup>120</sup> First of all, because these parties were highly significant to the formation and functioning of post-war democracies, by contributing to the writing of post-war constitutions, and by allying themselves with socialist and Christian democrat parties throughout the post-war period.<sup>121</sup> More important, however, is the inclusion of these parties from the perspective of the study of political ideas. Other than in the interwar era, after 1945 virtually no political

<sup>117</sup> See in particular Müller, *Contesting democracy*, pp. 146–7.

<sup>118</sup> D. P. Kommers, ‘The Federal Constitutional Court: guardian of German democracy’, *Annals of the Academy of Political and Social Science*, 603 (2006), pp. 111–28.

<sup>119</sup> Ginsborg, *A history of contemporary Italy*, p. 100.

<sup>120</sup> Compare with Conway and Depkat, ‘Towards a European history of the discourse of democracy’, p. 149.

<sup>121</sup> For France, see M. Winock, *Les gauches en France* (Paris, 2006). For the co-operation between DC and PCI in Italy in the 1970s, see most notably A. Giovagnoli, *Il caso Moro: una tragedia repubblicana* (Bologna, 2005).

force aired critique on democracy from an anti-democratic perspective.<sup>122</sup> In a seminal article in 2011, Jan Werner Müller noted that all modern political actors play on the discourse of democracy and that historians should therefore analyse their attempts to reconfigure the meaning of democracy.<sup>123</sup> Rightly, because of the fact that every political actor claimed to be a democrat after the war, diverging conceptions of democracy continued to exist. This ensured a continuing debate on the ‘valid’ conception of democracy in which all voices deserve to be studied – even though this study has emphasized that consensus on the meaning of democracy lacked also among more moderate forces.

This means, to conclude, that the reciprocal denial of democratic legitimacy by major political actors in the 1950s revealed in this article provides reason to doubt the existence of a ‘democratic golden age’ in post-war Western Europe. While everyone claimed to be a democrat after 1945, the political discourse in the three major ‘transformed’ democracies demonstrates that no consensual democratic order emerged in which the main political forces accepted each other as democratic. This debate culminated around the turn of the 1960s, which marked the beginning of nationally disparate developments in which the main political parties increasingly agreed on how democracy should be conceptualized and practised.

<sup>122</sup> For an exception, see P. Rauti, *La democrazia: ecco il nemico* (Rome, 1952).

<sup>123</sup> J.W. Müller, ‘European intellectual history as contemporary history’, *Journal of Contemporary History*, 46 (2011), pp. 574–90, at p. 589.